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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether behaviorally withdrawn children differ from aggressive and prosocial children in their attributional styles, social goals, and self-efficacy perceptions. Fourth and fifth-grade students (n=506) responded to a set of hypothetical situations involving ambiguous provocation. Specifically, they interpreted the protagonist's intent, rated their social goals for the situations, and judged their self-efficacy in accomplishing these goals. Peer evaluations of children's withdrawn, aggressive, and prosocial behavior were also obtained in order to classify children as withdrawn, aggressive, or prosocial. Results showed that behaviorally withdrawn children were strikingly similar to the prosocial children on the social-cognitive variables investigated, but differed significantly from the aggressive children. Compared with the aggressive children, the withdrawn children were less likely to attribute hostile intentions to the protagonist. In addition, withdrawn children rated problem-solving and relationship-oriented goals higher and reported that they would be relatively skilled at fulfilling these goals. Furthermore, withdrawn children gave lower ratings to the goals and self-efficacy perceptions concerning retaliation. The results suggest that despite their withdrawn behavioral style, children who are typically inhibited among their peers have a social-cognitive profile that is quite prosocial. The implications of these findings for interventions for behaviorally withdrawn children are discussed. (Contains 11 references and 8 figures). (Author)

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Social-Cognitive Processes of Behaviorally Withdrawn Children

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Paper presented in the symposium, "Current Perspectives on Internalizing Disorders in Children" (Harvey Clarizio, Chair) at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 4-8, 1994, New Orleans, LA.

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Abstract

This study examines whether behaviorally withdrawn children differ from aggressive and prosocial children in their attributional styles, social goals, and self-efficacy perceptions. Fourth- and fifth-grade students (n = 506) responded to a set of hypothetical situations involving ambiguous provocation. Specifically, they interpreted the protagonist's intent, rated their social goals for the situations, and judged their self-efficacy in accomplishing these goals. Peer evaluations of children's withdrawn, aggressive, and prosocial behavior were also obtained in order to classify children as withdrawn, aggressive, or prosocial. Results showed that behaviorally withdrawn children were strikingly similar to the prosocial children on the social-cognitive variables investigated, but differed significantly from the aggressive children. Compared to the aggressive children, the withdrawn children were less likely to attribute hostile intentions to the protagonist. In addition, withdrawn children rated problem-solving and relationship-oriented goals higher and reported that they would be relatively skilled at fulfilling these goals. Furthermore, withdrawn children gave lower ratings to the goals and self-efficacy perceptions concerning retaliation. The results suggest that despite their withdrawn behavioral style, children who are typically inhibited among their peers have a social-cognitive profile that is quite prosocial. The implications of these findings for interventions for behaviorally withdrawn children are discussed.

Social-Cognitive Processes of Behaviorally Withdrawn Children

Increasingly, researchers in the area of children's social behavior have been investigating the kinds of cognitive processes that might underlie differences in children's social behavior. Much of the research attention has focused on the thought patterns of aggressive children, and very little work has studied the social-cognitive characteristics of behaviorally withdrawn children. Our research examines whether withdrawn children differ from aggressive and prosocial children in three kinds of social-cognitive factors - their attributions of intent, their social goals, and their perceptions of self-efficacy.

In this study, ambiguous provocation situations were used to investigate these social-cognitive factors. Ambiguous provocations were selected because past research has revealed large individual differences in how children interpret and respond to these scenarios in which some harm is hypothetically done to the subject, but it is not clear whether the protagonist brought about the harm accidentally or on purpose. It has been well documented by Dodge and his colleagues (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge, Murphy, & Buchsbaum, 1984) as well as others (Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1980; Slaby & Guerra, 1988) that children who are aggressive tend to attribute hostile intentions to another child who harms them but whose intentions are ambiguous. Furthermore, aggressive children tend to report that they would respond to the provocation in an aggressive manner. In contrast, children who are nonaggressive are more likely to believe that the provocation occurred accidentally and to report that they would respond in a nonaggressive way.

Although nonaggressive children seem to have a more benign view toward the provoking child, previous research has not examined which kinds of nonaggressive children have this benign view. Do withdrawn as well as prosocial children have this nonhostile attributional style? It could be hypothesized that behaviorally withdrawn children have a history of negative interactions with others and as a result have a

paranoid view of others and do attribute hostile intent. Presumably they would respond to the provocation by withdrawing from the situation rather than by attacking the provoking child. On the other hand, it could be hypothesized that behaviorally withdrawn children have a more benign view of others and interpret the provocation as accidental, but still choose to withdraw from the situation because any arousing situation leads them to disengage and withdraw. Data relevant to these alternative hypotheses were collected in the present research.

In addition to attributions of intent, it has been hypothesized that children's social goals play an important role in their behavioral decision making (e.g., Dodge, 1986; Renshaw & Asher, 1983; Wentzel, 1991). However, there has been very little work that has examined the relation between children's typical behavioral characteristics and their social goals. In one study, Slaby and Guerra (1988) found that in response to ambiguous provocations, aggressive children were more likely than nonaggressive children to select a hostile social goal versus a nonhostile goal in a forced-choice task. Even less attention has been given to the goals of behaviorally withdrawn children and behaviorally prosocial children. It seems plausible that when provoked, withdrawn children may try to avoid a confrontation and to protect themselves, rather than being concerned with goals related to retaliation or the maintenance of relationships. It also seems reasonable to hypothesize that prosocial children will focus on trying to deal with the problem in a peaceful manner and trying to maintain a positive relationship with the protagonist. The present study was designed to replicate and extend the Slaby and Guerra (1988) work on the goals endorsed by aggressive children and also provided the opportunity to investigate the social goals of prosocial and withdrawn children.

Finally, the present study was designed to examine the self-efficacy perceptions of withdrawn, aggressive, and prosocial children. We hypothesized that children are likely to pursue those goals that they believe they can most effectively achieve. Perry,

Perry, and Rasmussen (1986) found that aggressive children reported that it was easier to perform an aggressive behavior, and more difficult to inhibit aggressive reactions. Aggressive children were also more confident that they could achieve tangible rewards and reduce aversive treatment by others via aggression. However, it is not known what kinds of behavior withdrawn children and prosocial children believe they are most effective in performing, particularly when they are provoked. It may be that withdrawn children are fairly confident in their ability to avoid interaction and less confident about their ability to retaliate or to maintain a good relationship with another child. In addition, it seems plausible that prosocial children think they would be good at dealing with provocation in a relationship-preserving way, as opposed to in an avoidant or retaliatory manner. Our study provided the opportunity to investigate the self-efficacy perceptions of the different behavior groups.

In summary, this study's primary purpose was to use ambiguous provocation situations as a vehicle for examining whether children who differ in their typical behavioral characteristics vary in their attributions of intent, their social goals, and their self-efficacy perceptions. We were especially interested in the social-cognitive profile of behaviorally withdrawn children and how that profile compares to that of their aggressive and prosocial peers.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 506 children recruited from 30 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classrooms in three elementary schools in three towns in Maine. A total of 247 boys and 259 girls (205 fourth graders, 228 fifth graders, and 73 sixth graders) were involved. (Of the potential pool of subjects, 77% were given parental consent and gave their own assent to participate in the study.) Children's mean age was 11 years and 2 months. The ethnic composition of the sample was 99% Caucasian.

Measures

Ambiguous provocations. In their classrooms, children responded to six ambiguous provocation vignettes (see Figure 1 for a sample vignette). Each vignette described a hypothetical situation in which a peer of the same gender as the subject does something that brings harm to the subject (e.g., milk is spilled on the child), but it is not clear whether the peer has caused the harm on purpose or by accident.

After each vignette, children answered a series of questions. The first question assessed children's judgments regarding the protagonist's intent, asking if the act had occurred by accident or on purpose. In the next question, children reported how they would respond to the provocation. First, they answered "no," "maybe," or "yes" to each of the behavioral alternatives. The behavioral alternatives included two aggressive responses - one physical (e.g., pour milk on the boy's back the next day) and one verbal (e.g., say something mean to him); two withdrawn responses - one passive (e.g., ignore it) and one avoidant (e.g., leave the table); and two prosocial responses - one involving repairing the problem created by the protagonist (e.g., ask an adult to get a towel), and one requesting clarification about why the act occurred (e.g., ask him how it happened). After rating the behaviors, children were instructed to circle the one behavior they thought they would be most likely to do in response to the provocation.

In the next question, children were asked to think about why they would respond to the provocation in the way they had reported. Specifically, they were questioned about what they would be trying to do in the situation. Nine possible goals for the situation were presented (see Figure 2). Children rated on a 5-point scale the extent to which they would be trying to accomplish each of the provided goals, with 1 = really disagree and 5 = really agree. These goals included some aggressive goals (i. e., trying to get back at the other child, trying to make the other child feel bad, trying to look strong), withdrawn goals (i. e., trying to stay away from the child, trying to avoid getting hurt, trying to protect the self), and prosocial goals (i. e., trying to work things out

peacefully, trying to still get along with the child, trying to take care of the problem created by the protagonist).

Finally, to assess children's perceptions of self-efficacy, the same nine possible goals were presented and children rated on a 5-point scale (1 = really disagree; 5 = really agree) the extent to which they thought they would be good at accomplishing each of the nine goals if they were to try to achieve the goal (see Figure 3).

Peer assessment of behavior. A few weeks after children had responded to the ambiguous provocations, we obtained peer evaluations of children's aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behavior in everyday school life. A total of twelve items were used (Rockhill & Asher, 1992), with the aggression, withdrawal, and prosocial subscales each consisting of four items (see Figure 4). The class roster appeared underneath each item, and children were asked to circle the names of all of those children (excluding themselves) who fit the item description. Children's scores for each factor were the mean proportion of times they were nominated for each of the items comprising the factor. To normalize the distribution of these factor scores, an arcsine transformation was done. Finally, the aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial scores were standardized by classroom. Asher, Zelis, Parker, and Bruene (1991) have reported excellent internal relibility for these subscales (coefficient alphas of .97, .83, and .95 for aggression, withdrawal, and prosocial behavior, respectively).

To investigate the relation between children's typical behavioral characteristics and their social-cognitive processes, children were classified as aggressive, withdrawn, or prosocial. Aggressive children were those whose aggression score was one standard deviation or above on the aggression subscale and whose withdrawal and prosocial scores were less than the mean. Withdrawn children were one standard deviation or above on the withdrawal subscale and less than the mean on the aggression and prosocial subscales. Finally, children were classified as prosocial if they were one standard deviation or above on the prosocial subscale and less than the mean on the aggression and

withdrawal subscales. Based on this procedure, 41 aggressive children, 30 withdrawn children, and 43 prosocial children were identified.

Results

Results showed that behaviorally withdrawn children were strikingly similar to the prosocial children on the social-cognitive variables investigated, but differed significantly from the aggressive children. In attributions of intent, both the withdrawn and the prosocial children were significantly less likely than the aggressive children to believe that the protagonist had caused the harm on purpose (see Figure 5). When reporting how they would respond to the provocation, both the withdrawn and the prosocial children gave significantly lower ratings than the aggressive children to the aggressive alternatives and were significantly less likely to choose an aggressive item as their most likely response (see Figure 6). Furthermore, withdrawn and prosocial children rated the prosocial alternatives significantly higher than did the aggressive children and were significantly more likely to choose a prosocial item as their most likely response. The withdrawn children did rate withdrawn behaviors significantly higher than the aggressive and prosocial groups. However, all groups were equally unlikely to select a withdrawn behavior as their most likely response to provocation. Instead, like the prosocial children, the withdrawn children were most apt to choose a prosocial reaction to the provocation.

In describing their social goals, both the withdrawn and the prosocial children rated the goals of getting back at the protagonist and making the child feel bad lower than did the aggressive children (see Figure 7). The three groups did not differ significantly in their ratings of the goal of trying to look strong and the goal of trying to protect themselves. The withdrawn children rated the goals of trying to stay away from the protagonist and trying to avoid getting hurt significantly higher than did the aggressive children, but the withdrawn children did not differ from the prosocial children in their ratings of these two goals. In terms of the prosocial goals, both the withdrawn and

prosocial children rated the goals of working things out peacefully and getting along with the protagonist significantly higher than did the aggressive children. Finally, the withdrawn and prosocial children did not differ significantly in their ratings of the goal of taking care of the problem, and the withdrawn children rated this goal significantly higher than did the aggressive children.

Children's ratings of their self-efficacy in accomplishing the various goals revealed that the withdrawn children were significantly less likely than the aggressive children to believe that they would be good at getting back at the protagonist, making the child feel bad, and looking strong (see Figure 8). Withdrawn children and prosocial children did not differ significantly from each other in their confidence in achieving these goals, except that the withdrawn children were less likely than prosocial children to think they would be good at getting back at the protagonist. The three groups did not differ significantly in their ratings of their ability to protect themselves, to stay away from the protagonist, and to avoid getting hurt. Regarding the prosocial behaviors, although the three groups did not differ significantly in their perceptions that they could work things out peacefully and take care of the problem created by the protagonist, the withdrawn children were significantly more likely than the aggressive children to believe they would be good at getting along with the protagonist.

Discussion

The results suggest that despite their withdrawn behavioral style, children who are typically inhibited among their peers have a social-cognitive profile that is quite prosocial. In making attributions regarding ambiguous provocations, the withdrawn children were similar to the prosocial children, in that they tended to believe that the harm was caused accidentally. It appears, then, that when interpreting actions performed by peers, withdrawn children do not have the kind of hostile and paranoid view regarding others that aggressive children exhibit.

In addition, it seems that withdrawn children are generally concerned with

prosocial goals, and they believe that they would be relatively skilled at fulfilling these goals. Like their behaviorally prosocial peers, the withdrawn children gave significantly higher ratings than the aggressive children to the relationship-oriented goals of working things out peacefully and getting along with the protagonist. They were also quite concerned about taking care of the problem created by the protagonist. The withdrawn children were not antisocial in their goal orientation, since they endorsed the goals of getting back at the protagonist and making the protagonist feel bad significantly less than did the aggressive children, and they evaluated themselves as less able to achieve these retaliation goals.

The three groups did not differ significantly in the goal of protecting themselves in the provocation situations. This finding may be explained by the fact that the self-protection goal may be fulfilled using a variety of strategies, such as actively fighting back, withdrawing from the situation, or confronting the problem directly in a prosocial way. It is interesting that the withdrawn children rated the goal of trying to avoid getting hurt significantly higher than did the aggressive children. This suggests that in trying to protect themselves, these children would use more avoidant strategies. Indeed, the withdrawn children rated the goal of staying away from the protagonist significantly higher than did the aggressive children. Furthermore, the withdrawn children believed they would be quite good at staying away from the protagonist.

Overall, the results indicate that withdrawn children have a generally prosocial orientation toward their peers. They have a fairly benign view when interpreting others' actions, they endorse prosocial goals, and they believe that they would be effective at accomplishing these prosocial goals if they tried. Why, then, are these children more inhibited in their interactions with peers? Despite their prosocial goals, these children also seem to be concerned with avoidant goals and may in fact give priority to these avoidant goals when they are involved with their peers. It is interesting to note that in response to the ambiguous provocations, those children

identified as withdrawn by their peers rated the withdrawn behaviors higher than did both the aggressive and prosocial children. However, when selecting their most likely response to the provocation, both withdrawn and prosocial children chose the prosocial alternatives most frequently, and the withdrawn alternatives were rarely selected by any of the children. It is possible that in the low-risk context of responding to hypothetical situations, as opposed to being actively involved with others, the withdrawn children's relationship-oriented goals were able to dominate over their avoidance goals as they decided on their most likely response to provocation. It would be interesting to observe whether when involved in a real-life ambiguous provocation, withdrawn children's avoidant goals would be more influential than their relationship-oriented goals as they responded to the situation.

Interestingly, the withdrawn children believe they would be good at achieving various prosocial goals if they tried. Why is it that they tend not to try to be more prosocial in their daily interactions? Engaging in prosocial interaction does take more effort and self-confidence than does simply avoiding peers. It may be that the withdrawn children suffer from a low level of social self-confidence that inhibits them from pursuing relationship-oriented goals and encourages them to achieve avoidant goals.

When intervening with behaviorally withdrawn children, it may be useful to put these children in actual situations with peers in which they are instructed and encouraged to interact with peers in direct, rather than avoidant, ways. By pursuing and successfully achieving prosocial goals, withdrawn children's overall social confidence may be enhanced. It may be possible, then, that in other social interactions in more generalized contexts, they will be less inclined to pursue avoidant goals, and relationship-oriented goals will rise to the top of their social goal hierarchy. It must be recognized, however, that some children may not value peer interaction, and this is why they avoid peers, rather than because they lack confidence in directly interacting with peers. Thus, it would be important to know whether all withdrawn children are

dissatisfied in being somewhat on the fringes of the peer group. Those withdrawn children who really desire to have more involvement with their peers are likely to be the most responsive to intervention efforts.

Our study's results suggest that behaviorally withdrawn children process social information in a way that prepares them for positive interactions and discourages them from hostile encounters. The challenge is to provide withdrawn children with the tools they need to put their thoughts into action so that they can become more actively and prosocially involved with their peers.

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Figure 1

Sample Ambiguous Provocation Situation
and Follow-up Questions

Imagine that you are sitting at the lunch table at school, eating lunch. You look up and see another boy coming over to your table with a carton of milk. You turn around to eat your lunch, and the next thing that happens is that the boy spills milk all over your back. The milk gets your shirt all wet.

1. Do you think that he got milk all over you:

   A. on purpose?
   B. by accident?

2. What would you do next after the boy poured milk on you?

A. Ignore it.	no	maybe	yes
B. Say something mean to him.	no	maybe	yes
C. Leave the table.	no	maybe	yes
D. Ask an adult to get a towel or something.	no	maybe	yes
E. Pour milk on the boy 's back the next day.	no	maybe	yes
F. Ask him how it happened.	no	maybe	yes

Figure 2

Social Goals Questionnaire

3. Look at the answer you circled for #2. You said that this is the thing you would be most likely to do if another boy poured milk on you. Think about why you decided on this answer. What would you be trying to do?

	really disagree				really agree
A. I would be trying to get back at the other boy.	1	2	3	4	5
B. I would be trying to work things out peacefully.	1	2	3	4	5
C. I would be trying to stay away from the other boy.	1	2	3	4	5
D. I would be trying to make the other boy feel bad.	1	2	3	4	5
E. I would be trying to protect myself.	1	2	3	4	5
F. I would be trying to take care of my wet shirt.	1	2	3	4	5
G. I would be trying to avoid getting hurt.	1	2	3	4	5
H. I would be trying to still get along with the boy.	1	2	3	4	5
I. I would be trying to look strong and make sure the other boy didn't think I was a wimp.	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 3

Self-Efficacy Perceptions Questionnaire

4. Now, pretend that you decided to try to do the things listed below after the boy spilled milk on you. Do you think you would be good at doing each of these things if you tried them?

	really disagree				really agree
A. I would be good at getting back at that boy if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
B. I would be good at working things out peacefully if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
C. I would be good at staying away from the boy in the future if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
D. I would be good at making the other boy feel bad if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
E. I would be good at protecting myself if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
F. I would be good at taking care of my wet shirt if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
G. I would be good at avoiding getting hurt if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
H. I would be good at still getting along with the boy if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5
I. I would be good at looking strong and making sure the other boy doesn't think I'm a wimp if I tried.	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 4

Behavior Nomination Items

Aggression subscale (alpha = .97)

Who starts fights?

Who is mean?

Who gets mad easily?

Who hits, pushes, or kicks?

Withdrawal subscale (alpha = .83)

Who likes to be alone a lot?

Who is easy to push around?

Who is afraid to join in a group?

Who is shy?

Prosocial subscale (alpha = .95)

Who is friendly?

Who shares, takes turns, and cooperates?

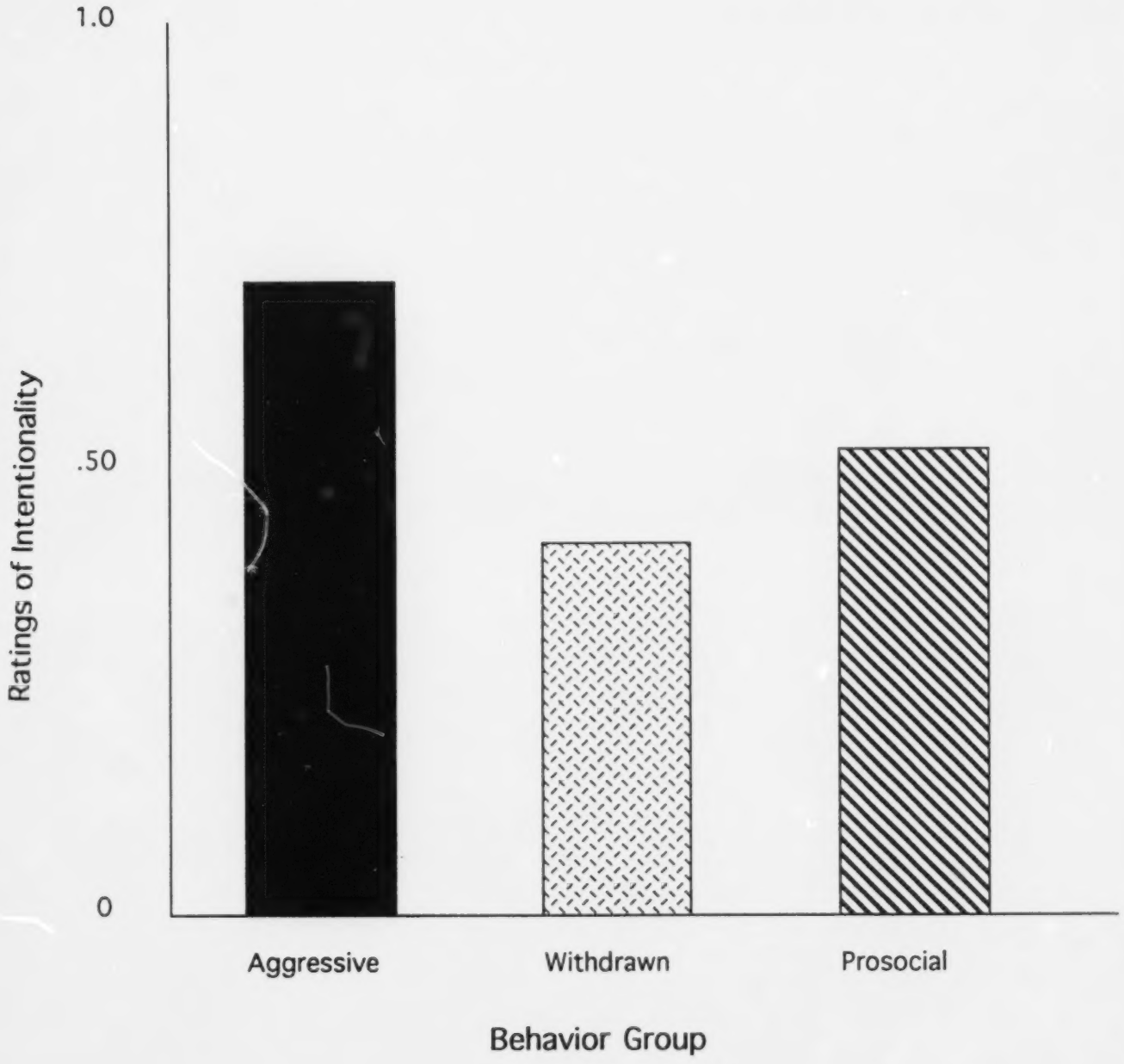
Who is helpful?

Who has a good sense of humor?

(Rockhill & Asher, 1992)

Figure 5

Attributions of Intent by the Different Behavior Groups



Note. 0 = by accident; 1 = on purpose. Both withdrawn and prosocial children are significantly lower than aggressive children (Tukey).

Figure 6

Self-Reported Responses to Ambiguous Provocation

	Behavior Group			
Behavior	Aggressive (n = 41)	Withdrawn (n = 30)	Prosocial (n = 43)	F-value (2, 113)
Behavior Ratings				
Aggression	1.19^{AB}	0.52^{A}	0.71^{B}	11.58**
Withdrawn	0.56^{A}	0.78^{AB}	0.58^{B}	4.78**
Prosocial	1.32^{AB}	1.59^{A}	1.52^{B}	4.06*
Most Likely Response				
Aggression	3.07^{AB}	0.97^{A}	1.44^{B}	9.58**
Withdrawn	0.73	0.70	0.44	0.84
Prosocial	2.20^{AB}	4.30^{A}	4.14^{B}	12.02**

Note. Behaviors were rated on a 0 (no), 1 (maybe), 2 (yes) scale. Most likely response was the number of each response chosen out of 6 stories. Matching letters differ significantly (Tukey). **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

Figure 7

Ratings of Social Goals by Different Behavior Groups

Goal	Behavior Group: Aggressive (n = 41)	Withdrawn (n = 30)	Prosocial (n = 43)	F-value (2, 113)
Get back	3.54^{AB}	2.54^{A}	2.82^{B}	6.36**
Feel bad	3.05^{A}	2.22^{A}	2.49	3.92*
Look strong	3.87	3.12	3.47	2.82+
Protect self	3.59	3.68	3.41	0.60
Stay away	2.37^{A}	2.94^{A}	2.45	3.52*
Avoid hurt	3.05^{A}	3.82^{A}	3.42	4.39*
Peacefully	2.65^{AB}	3.34^{A}	3.23^{B}	3.26*
Get along	2.50^{AB}	3.49^{A}	3.38^{B}	7.94**
Take care	3.84^{A}	4.56^{A}	4.07	5.52**

Note. Goals were rated on a 1 (really disagree) to 5 (really agree) scale. Matching letters differ significantly (Tukey). **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, +$p < .10$.

Figure 8

Ratings of Self-Efficacy by Different Behavior Groups

	Behavior Group			
Self-Efficacy	Aggressive (n = 41)	Withdrawn (n = 30)	Prosocial (n = 43)	F-value (2, 113)
Get back	4.42^{A}	3.25^{AB}	3.93^{B}	8.98**
Feel bad	4.09^{A}	2.89^{A}	3.49	8.29**
Look strong	4.33^{A}	3.22^{A}	3.81	6.89**
Protect self	4.36	4.20	4.21	0.46
Stay away	3.27	3.68	3.27	1.37
Avoid hurt	3.99	4.06	4.01	0.05
Peacefully	3.07	3.62	3.47	1.66
Get along	2.91^{A}	3.81^{A}	3.54	5.01**
Take care	4.20	4.51	4.27	1.98

Note. Self-efficacy perceptions were rated on a 1 (really disagree) to 5 (really agree) scale. Matching letters differ significantly (Tukey).
**$p < .01$.